

SERVING THE COACHELLA VALLEY SINCE 1927

Activists intensify fight to save Wexler school building

Preservationists ask state to cut funds as tribe calls for more review of plan

By Mariecar Mendoza

The Desert Sun

PALM SPRINGS — With newfound support from an area Indian tribe, local preservationists are

taking their bid to save a midcentury modern building slated for demolition to the state of California.

Various interests are opposing a decision by the Palm Springs Unified School District Board of Ed-

ucation to level a building by renowned midcentury architects Donald Wexler and Richard Harrison later this year to make way for a new 9,000-square-foot Performing Arts Building.

The 55-year-old structure currently serves as the administration building for Ramon Academy, an alternative school on the Palm Springs High School campus.

The Palm Springs Preservation Foundation sent a letter dated May 20 to the State Allocation Board, the governing body that disburses money to California school districts, with the goal of blocking funding for the new building.

The group hopes to force the district to reconsider its plans, and possibly consider reusing the existing building.

TRIBE WEIGHS IN

Read the letter written by the Agua Caliente tribe calling for more review at mydesert.com

The debate also has attracted the attention of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, which sent a letter dated May 16 to the Palm Springs Unified School Dis-

Please see WEXLER, A2

WEXLER

Continued from A1

trict requesting the district conduct a "comprehensive analysis" before demolishing the building.

While the administration building is not within the boundaries of the Agua Caliente Reservation, it is within the tribe's "tribal use area," according to the letter signed by Patricia Garcia-Tuck of, director of the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians Tribal Historic Preservation Office.

This designation gives the tribe the opportunity to offer comment on land-use decisions in areas where the tribe has made their home over the centuries. This influence area reaches as far out as the Colorado River, according to Palm Springs Preservation Foundation president Ron Marshall.

Calls to tribal spokesman Alva Johnson were not returned.

"We never asked them to write on our behalf so we were quite happily surprised," Marshall said.

Whether or not the tribe's

comments carry any special weight, though, is questionable. As of Monday, school administration officials say they are not changing their plans.

The tribe's request for analysis is in response to claims that the Palm Springs Unified School District never conducted a study and instead streamlined the process.

Assistant Superintendent Lisa Howell told The Desert Sun, however, that a historical analysis was conducted and the district expects to receive the results of that study soon.

Howell said the study will be included in the district's response to the tribe's letter, which is currently being drafted.

The new building slated to replace the Wexler-Harrison structure has a proposed design to match the post-modern, Spanish-style arches of Ramon Academy seen off Ramon Road. The estimated cost is \$4 million.

The project would be partially funded by Measure E bond money that will be made available June 27.

After that date, the district has 90 days to award the construction contract or lose the \$874,416 it anticipates the State Allocation Board will award for the project, officials said.

To date, the district has spent \$385,000 for the drafted design of the new Performing Arts Building.

Construction is expected to begin in the fall with completion set for December 2013.

Brian Ingleson, director of the Palm Springs High School Band program, found the tribe's involvement "unbelievable."

"I'm pretty shocked with what's happened here," Ingleson told The Desert Sun.

He said the purpose of the project is to ensure the more than 200 students he currently oversees in the high school's music programs are in a safe building.

A chief concern is the existing building doesn't have a fire sprinkler system.

"The program runs in a building that was originally meant to hold a third of the students it has and it has no fire protections," said

Randy Vaughn, a band parent and president of the Spirit of the Sands Band Boosters.

Efforts to build the the proposed Performing Arts Building began five years ago. It has been a passionate issue for band students and parents, who say the program expects to see more than 400 students in the program in the coming years.

"The preservationists need to realize that it's time to move on and find another project and put their energy somewhere else," Vaughn said.

"We're just waiting for the thing to be settled so we can start moving forward."

The board is not expected to discuss the issue again until later this summer when it considers a contractor for the project.

At that time, the board can decide to scrap the proposed building design or move forward as planned, officials said.

Maricar Mendoza covers the city of Palm Springs for The Desert Sun. She can be reached at (760) 778-4669 or maricar.mendoza@thedesertsun.com. Follow her on Twitter @TDSMarMendoza.